As pharma marketing departments increasingly look towards digital services and solutions, there are a number of important considerations that companies cannot afford to neglect. Understanding client objectives should be the first port of call.

When talking about innovation in marketing, the creation of digital services and multi-platform offerings often comes up. There has been a great deal of innovation applied to the provision of digital services and solutions within the pharmaceutical industry, in spite of the unique challenges created by strict regulations on the marketing of medical products. That said, the design and development of customer-focused services and solutions is a relatively new approach in this sector.

First Steps

When beginning the process of delivering a digital service or solution to a pharmaceutical client, there are three critical points that must be addressed:

Establish Business Goals and Objectives
First, understand what the organisation wants to achieve with the offering of a digital solution. In this case, what are you trying to realise by providing a service to support either a healthcare professional or a patient within a particular therapeutic area? What are your goals, and what does the desired outcome look like? Before beginning the design process, it is imperative that the desired outcome, and how to measure its success, are established from the pharma company's perspective.

Understand the Customer's Needs
Once the objective of the solution is understood, a clear understanding of the customer's needs is required. The customer could be a patient, carer or healthcare professional; it is important to establish who your intended customer is, and to tailor your approach to their specific requirements and behaviours. The needs of a patient will be different from those of a carer or healthcare professional, and your solution may be used by all three or just one. Ensure that it is clear who the target is, and what their requirements and behaviours are when working or dealing with a particular disease and its treatment. The customer perspective is then kept at the centre of all design activity.

Include Evaluation Sessions
Ensure that the design works in real-life situations and provides a best practice user experience. It will not matter how good your content is if your users – likely to be a highly diverse subsection of the population – cannot apply it. Without testing, you will not be able to validate whether the solution meets customer needs and expectations, inform the design via an iterative process, nor ensure that it achieves business goals before launching (and launching a sub-par service is a costly mistake to make).

Process Guidelines

Once the key considerations have been addressed, there are a series of important points that should be thought about before developing a solution. Those covered here only scratch the surface, but serve as a good foundation to guide and support the creation of innovative digital solutions.

Therapeutic Area
Understand the therapeutic area in which the solution is to be used. Having knowledge of the disease pathway and the requirements of healthcare professionals and patient needs will help to inform the design,
guide decisions and create required content.

**Desired Outcomes**
Understand the exact behaviour and outcomes that the company wants to elicit by providing the solution, using business or stakeholder research. Is the aim to target a change in attitude; engagement with treatment choices; adherence to treatment regimes; for patients or carers to provide valuable information; or to change the patient’s perspective of the pharma company? It is important to understand how these objectives will be measured, as this will influence and shape design choices.

**Patient Pathway**
Know the patient’s pathway from pre-diagnosis to diagnosis and treatment, through to recovery, remission or management. Only by doing user – or customer – research in depth will you be able to understand the journey that a patient takes, and how the stages of their pathway affect their information and support needs, as well as their desire to share information or connect with others. In addition, any research must understand the patient’s motivation, barriers, triggers, pain points, drivers for seeking and absorbing information, and supporting tasks.

**Relevant Content**
Ensure that content is medically and emotionally relevant, and is written at the correct level for patients who are unlikely to have medical training. Testing is vital to make sure an individual with very low health literacy can understand, absorb and act on content. Illustrations and graphic images to help explain the disease and its treatment options can be helpful, as can including information specifically for carers who are able to influence patients’ behaviour through the disease pathway.

**Treatment Options**
Include content on treatment options. Regulations do not allow the identification of a particular brand, but providing information on the range of treatment choices, how they work, and their pros and cons, is essential to making the patient a partner in their treatment. Patients want to have a say, from an educated position, on the drugs they take. Understanding treatment options provides patients with a sense of control that is normally depleted by their disease.

**Learning Process**
Understand and map the patient’s learning journey – for example, which questions they might ask at each stage of their treatment – to inform the design of your content. The flow of content should mirror the patient’s learning process. Within that journey, it will be evident which information is required and when, as well as how patients or carers will want to share that material. It will also be clear when patients or carers will wish to ask questions of others like them, or even become a patient advocate, so that they can support and provide relevant information to others.
Ensure that you include content or access to content – via social media, for example – that is provided by people like your patients or carers. This is critical, as information from other patients and carers is highly desired – they want to hear about, hear from, learn from and converse with people like themselves.

**Guidance and Tools**
Provide guidance on how to act on the information supplied, and offer tools to support the suggested actions. Be it going to see a doctor, tracking symptoms, adhering to treatment, or just engaging with social media to get support – clear calls to action will be required.

**Shared Experience**
Ensure that you include content or access to content – via social media, for example – that is provided by people like your patients or carers. This is critical, as information from other patients and carers is highly desired – they want to hear about, hear from, learn from and converse with people like themselves. The sharing of personal experience is sometimes far more trusted than information from a healthcare provider.

**Source Credits**
Make sure that all content is appropriately referenced, and contributors and sponsors for the site and social media channels are clearly identified.

**Research is Key**
Designing a successful digital solution is impossible if either the business’s or the customer’s perspective alone is considered. Therefore, it is essential that all design activity is informed and guided by market, business and customer research. Using this research early will guide the proposition based on a deep understanding of the customer’s needs, as well as sparking innovation and keeping the design of the solution focused on what is important – better outcomes for all.

Additionally, to ensure that both the strategic and tactical objectives of your company and customers are being met, use a succession of validation and evaluation mechanisms to test your solution proposition and its design.

**Innovations in Pharma**
In healthcare, innovative solutions and services are emerging rapidly; this is most evident in hospitals like the Boston Children’s Hospital.

Here, they have implemented a number of digital services and solutions to improve patient care and increase patient engagement in their treatment. Examples include DisCo, an automated patient follow-up service designed to improve communication and coordination after patient discharge, and MyWay, a mobile application that provides a one-stop mobile hub to encourage patients to be more active decision-makers in their healthcare. Additionally, in 2012, the King’s Fund set up an initiative called Time to Think Differently. This programme was created to generate new thinking and initiatives on innovative ways of delivering high-quality care.

Pharma has been slower to innovate, but is rapidly catching up by providing services and mobile apps across a vast number of areas. These include treatment adherence, health literacy improvement and behaviour change – all with the objective of improving patient outcomes. The future already exists in some places, and is proving to be an exciting and effective place to be. The challenge now is to bring those innovative services together in a coordinated way, so that benefits can reach more of the population.